

Kunapipi

Volume 25 | Issue 1

Article 15

2003

Tim Winton's 'New Tribalism': Cloudstreet and Community

Stuart Murray

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi>



Part of the [Arts and Humanities Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Murray, Stuart, Tim Winton's 'New Tribalism': Cloudstreet and Community, *Kunapipi*, 25(1), 2003.
Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol25/iss1/15>

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library: research-pubs@uow.edu.au

Tim Winton's 'New Tribalism': Cloudstreet and Community

Abstract

In Gallipoli, Peter Weir's 1981 examination of nationalist sentiment and myth, the central protagonists, Archie Hamilton (Mark Lee) and Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson), are both members of the Western Australian Light Horse, a cavalry regiment and part of the 1st Australian Imperial Force that takes part in the conflict at Gallipoli in April 1915. Archie's death at the end of the narrative — charging into the Turkish guns — and Frank's ultimate survival conclude the film's often self-indulgent meditation on the nature of the national imaginary. In seeing Archie's death as tragedy, and Frank's survival in terms of a materialist nationalism and the guilt of the fall from an imperial innocence, Gallipoli underlines a number of national orthodoxies even as it seeks to hold others up for scrutiny. Australia, the film asserts, is still best understood in terms of its expression as an arena of male bonding and competition, a space where the interrelationship between the individual and the environment is pivotal in outlining identity, and where the key virtues of Anglo-Celtic pioneer capability and knowledge continue to help define community. The naivety of the imperial relationship may ultimately be seen to be over, but as Archie and Frank race across the athletics tracks of Western Australia as youths, or through the sand to the Pyramids at the Army's Egyptian training camp, the idea of the national community in this piece of early 1980s culture still has much in common with the late nineteenth-century cultural nationalism of the 'Coming Man' and the Bulletin (White 63-84; Turner 25-53 and 107-27).

STUART MURRAY

Tim Winton's 'New Tribalism': *Cloudstreet* and Community

In *Gallipoli*, Peter Weir's 1981 examination of nationalist sentiment and myth, the central protagonists, Archie Hamilton (Mark Lee) and Frank Dunne (Mel Gibson), are both members of the Western Australian Light Horse, a cavalry regiment and part of the 1st Australian Imperial Force that takes part in the conflict at Gallipoli in April 1915. Archie's death at the end of the narrative — charging into the Turkish guns — and Frank's ultimate survival conclude the film's often self-indulgent meditation on the nature of the national imaginary. In seeing Archie's death as tragedy, and Frank's survival in terms of a materialist nationalism and the guilt of the fall from an imperial innocence, *Gallipoli* underlines a number of national orthodoxies even as it seeks to hold others up for scrutiny. Australia, the film asserts, is still best understood in terms of its expression as an arena of male bonding and competition, a space where the interrelationship between the individual and the environment is pivotal in outlining identity, and where the key virtues of Anglo-Celtic pioneer capability and knowledge continue to help define community. The naivety of the imperial relationship may ultimately be seen to be over, but as Archie and Frank race across the athletics tracks of Western Australia as youths, or through the sand to the Pyramids at the Army's Egyptian training camp, the idea of the national community in this piece of early 1980s culture still has much in common with the late nineteenth-century cultural nationalism of the 'Coming Man' and the *Bulletin* (White 63-84; Turner 25-53 and 107-27).

In Tim Winton's 1991 novel *Cloudstreet*, a narrative spanning 20 years of mid twentieth-century Australian life, Lester Lamb, the patriarch of one of the two families that dominate the narrative, is revealed also to have fought with the Light Horse at Gallipoli. In one of the novel's many scenes at the Lamb kitchen table in the house on Cloud Street, Lester is drawn into conversation with his wife, Oriel, and son, Quick, about the part the family played in the First World War. Quick asks Oriel:

The one who went to war. The half brother you were waitin for. Did he come back?
No.

Died of wounds in Palestine. The Holy Land. Shot by a Turkish airman at a well. He was a signalman. He was waterin horses. He was always good with horses.

Did you know him Dad? You were there.

I was only at Anzac, said Lester.

He was a genius with horses, said Oriel

Horses were geniuses with me, said Lester. That's why I was in the Light Horse.
They were always lighter after they bucked me off.

You were a hero, said Quick.

Lester pumped the old harmonica to break the quiet, and because he knows, well as Oriel knows, that it's just not true. (72)

It is Quick's youth that prompts his easy conflation of his father's presence at Gallipoli with the conception of him as a hero. At this point in the narrative (the conversation takes place in the mid 1940s) Quick has no reason to question the dominance of the cultural nationalism secured by the elevation of the Returned Soldier to the position of unassailable icon following the end of the First World War; but, as Winton's narrative makes clear, Lester Lamb's status as a Gallipoli veteran confirms little that is of value. In contrast to the mythic constructions of Weir's film, the world of *Cloudstreet* — working-class Perth suburbs, railway tracks, rivers and estuaries — rather presents personal and communal identity caught in limbo and open to renegotiation. The standard markers of Australian nationalist orthodoxy as agonised over in *Gallipoli* are replaced in the novel by the necessities of understanding the nature of the everyday and the mundane, by the fraught nature of fate and faith, and by an acceptance of versions of family and humanity that refigure an idea of community. The conception of Australia as a space of masculine capability, articulated within a laconic vernacular, becomes not a conclusion in Winton's text, but rather a point of departure.

The consolidation of the myths produced by Gallipoli suffused much of Australian public culture in the decades following the end of the First World War, producing models of masculinity, community and nationhood that became inscribed as cultural norms. It is these very norms that Winton's notion of the potential 'new tribalism' of Australian community seeks to disrupt, especially by way of *Cloudstreet*'s representation of family. To some degree, the novel continues the concerns of Winton's previous novels: *An Open Swimmer* (1982), *Shallows* (1984), *That Eye, the Sky* (1986), and *In the Winter Dark* (1988). Like the earlier texts, the narrative is dominated by the presence of water. For Winton, the rivers and coast of Western Australia around Perth are both evocative of place, and markers of vision and rebirth conveying central tenets of Christian faith. *Cloudstreet* is framed by Fish Lamb's 'second drowning', a rush to embrace the river that contains 'all the wonders inside ... all the great and the glorious' (2), and mirrors an earlier scene in which Fish is accidentally dragged underwater by a net while the Lamb family is out fishing. For Fish, water conveys a truth: 'and then my walls are tipping and I burst into the moon, sun and stars of who I really am. Being Fish Lamb. Perfectly. Always. Everyplace. Me' (424). For Winton this kind of conjunction of knowledge and self and place is the revelation the fiction works towards. As he said in a 1991 interview, at the time of *Cloudstreet*'s publication: 'if I know where I am, I usually know who I am. I write about small

places; about people in small situations. If I can get a grip on the geography, I can get a grip on the people' (Willbanks 190).

In a similar vein, *Cloudstreet*, like Winton's previous fiction, contains central characters confused by the difficulties of the everyday world and often unable to articulate their position in relation to family or community (Matthews 84). Jerra, in *An Open Swimmer*, is plagued with repressed guilt about sexual depravity. Cleve Cookson, in *Shallows*, comes to the small Western Australian coastal town of Angelus as a failure. Initially saved by his love for his new wife Queenie, he nevertheless senses the end of his happiness, a process he seems unable to avoid:

He loved this woman. There was nothing left that meant more to him. The only happy days in his life had been spent with her. Their love had brought him life, colour, hope; and now he was almost able to stand back and see himself flirting with loss. It astounded him, but he did nothing to arrest it' (23).

In *That Eye, the Sky*, the schoolboy Ort struggles with the mysteries of the mundane until he recognises that it is only some form of the visionary that will explain the routines of the commonplace. In *Cloudstreet*, within the complexities and demands of communal and familial belonging, the faith of the Lamb family is set against the stress placed on luck by the novel's other central family, the Pickles, with whom the Lambs share the Cloud Street house. If Oriel and Lester Lamb are allowed to believe, even briefly, that Fish is saved from drowning during his accident by miraculous divine intervention, such faith is initially juxtaposed in the novel by Sam Pickles' stress on the 'shifty shadow' of God. At the very start of the narrative, Sam, ignoring the tell-tale signs to 'stay there right till the shadow's fallen across whoever's lucky or unlucky enough' (9), loses the fingers of his right hand in an accident aboard a barge at the guano mine where he works. For both the Lambs and the Pickles, articulating why such almost casual disasters can take place seems an impossibility early in the novel. With the reassurances of faith and the random nature of luck seemingly equal potential categories of explanation, neither can be relied upon, and all the characters seem caught in a pessimistic stasis. As Sam lies in hospital, visited by his wife Dolly and daughter Rose, the scene defies sentiment and meaning: 'The woman and the daughter do not speak. The crippled man does not stir. The breeze comes in the window and stops the scene turning into a painting' (16).

Similarly, Quick Lamb extends the characterisation of Jerra, Cleve and Ort in his battles with the often restrictive pressures of an orthodox masculinity that leave him frequently incapable of expression. Tortured over the feeling that he was responsible for Fish's accident, Quick 'picks up sadness like he's got a radar for it' (89), and constructs a bedroom wall of sorrow, a 'gallery of the miserable' (61), plastered with newspaper pictures of refugees and prisoners of war. For Quick, emotional articulacy lies buried beneath the consequences of his own adolescence and the Lambs' various family hostilities and traumas, and the wider cultural pressures that, as seen in Weir's *Gallipoli*, value the male as laconic

joker. His reaction is to leave school and the house on Cloud Street, and to go bush. He becomes a kangaroo culler, and in so doing enacts the kind of masculine capability that, within the orthodox cultural nationalism that dominated much twentieth-century Australian thought, projects an image of personal physical aptitude and efficiency, and an idea of community predicated on the extension of such pioneering settler traits. As with Jerra's fishing and bushman skills in *An Open Swimmer*, Quick's abilities are considerable, but in 'learning not to think much at these times, only to listen' (197), he is becoming less, rather than more, articulate in the ways of living in the world. Struck in the chest by a kangaroo he has failed to kill properly, Quick has a vision as he lies wounded. He sees Fish rowing across the wheat field towards him in a clearly suggestive substitution of the element in which Quick feels most at home, water, for the notion of place he has come to in his work (200). Quick heals, but on a subsequent culling expedition sees a vision of himself, 'a man running raw and shirtless in the night ... tough with fear' (204), coming towards him. Stunned by what he has seen, and unable to explain it in any rational terms, Quick flees.

Within such an episode lies a crucial element of the novel's delineation of community. The pressures that dominate Quick's narrative are clearly personal, but Winton inflects them with the traces of a number of recognisable cultural traits so that the actions of character are endlessly involved in a revision of key conceptions of orthodox personal or communal behaviour. In effect, Quick's failure as a bushman points to the poverty of the assumption that meaningful identity is necessarily informed by an engagement with the land and settler values. Initially, Quick misses the signs that inform him of this. His vision of Fish, and that of his own fearful self, is followed by his picking up an aboriginal figure when out driving. The man, who has an 'inexhaustible' supply of wine and bread, is an angelic figure who recurs throughout the narrative. He directs Quick back to the house on Cloud Street in another obvious sign of appropriate return, but 'laughing fearfully' Quick can only again flee from his home. His next immediate stop though, with family members for whom he works for a short time, is only another sign of the paucity of possible ways of living:

Earl and May lived in a truckshed by the road out of town. They had been married twenty years now and had no children. They were farmers as well as truckies, and they were rough as guts. Earl could feel no pain and he could not imagine it in others. The depression had made him hard; war had beaten him flat and work had scoured all the fun from him. He was hard beyond belief, beyond admiration. On a Sunday night Quick saw him apply a blowtorch to the belly of a fallen cow before going back inside to pedal the old pianola for May. The land has done this to them, Quick thought; this could have been us. (211)

The ways in which this passage suggests personal values can be eroded by inappropriate living structures is typical of the method by which *Cloudstreet* revises an idea of community. Sam's loss of his fingers so early in the novel is

another example, in that it immediately removes him from his most obvious context, that of the working-class realm of the masculine. Dolly immediately notes that the injury is to Sam's 'bloody working hand' (15). Sam can continue drinking and gambling, those other key activities of the laconic working-class male, but his injury necessarily changes the ways in which he interacts with such a canonically defined realm of the male subject. He is, as it were, forcibly cut off from one of the spaces the culture assumes he should inhabit, and made to face the costs of this. In a 1997 interview, Winton claimed that he writes 'from an orthodox female point of view' (Guy 129), in opposition to what he sees as a mainstream tradition in Australian writing. In *Cloudstreet*, the result is that while many male characters, such as Quick and Sam, can feel their estrangement from their emotional lives and the spheres of activity that might contain them, it is the female characters that act upon the consequences of such realisations. Quick's world is transformed by his relationship with Rose Pickles, and it is the birth of their son, and the creation of a new family from the two familial communities within the Cloud Street house, that function as key markers of positive change in the novel.

More generally, the house itself is full of personal stories; histories embedded in the walls that converse with the Lambs and the Pickles. Early on in the novel, we learn that the house was formerly owned by a widow who established it as a mission house for young aboriginal girls: 'She aimed to make ladies of them so they could set a standard for the rest of their sorry race' (36). Following the death of one of the girls, the widow forces all the others to view the body before she herself dies from a heart attack while playing the piano a few weeks later: 'She cried out in surprise, in outrage and her nose hit middle C hard enough to darken the room with sound.... There was middle C in that library until rigor mortis set in.... The house was boarded up, and it held its breath' (36). Such subtle inflections of history characterise the text. For the Lambs and Pickles, although they do not realise it, the house is a palimpsest of the nation even as it is the domestic space that contains individual struggles. The note from the piano rings throughout the house in an echo of the barbarity of racial prejudice, and the ghosts that inhabit the rooms are only finally exorcised when Rose gives birth in the library where the widow died. In labour, Rose presses her head to the wall 'where a vicious old white woman looks down aghast at what's pinning her knees' (382), and following the birth 'The room goes quiet. The spirits on the wall are fading, fading, finally being forced on their way to oblivion, free of the house, freeing the house, leaving a warm, clean, sweet space among the living, among the good and hopeful' (384). For Winton, the birth of Harry is momentous as a marker of a new community. After living away from the house in their own family home, Rose and Quick agree that they feel the need to return. Rose is explicit about the nature of this space:

I like the crowds and the noise. And, well, I guess I like the idea, it's like getting another childhood, another go at things. Think of it: I'm in this old house with the boy next door and his baby, and I'm not miserable and starving or frightened. I'm right in the middle. It's like a village, I don't know. I have these feelings. I can never explain these feelings...

But it's two families. It's a bloody tribe, a new tribe. (418–19)

Though Rose cannot articulate it, the 'new tribalism' of the Cloud Street house is, by implication, a reformed national space as well, a gesture towards a world that is more supportive and just. For Winton, this is clearly a point about settlement. His acknowledgement that he had to learn that Australia contained 'many ways and many wisdoms' establishes a viewpoint that extends beyond European notions of the nation: 'What were aboriginals doing out there for 40,000 years walking about, feeling like they belonged to the land, and belonged to their stories and to their dreams? How can we say that God was absent?' (Butstone 19).

For her part, Oriel wrestles with the difficulties of being in the world in ways that many of the other characters are simply incapable of, and which are crucial to Winton's ideas of a settled sense of self and place. It is Oriel, for example, who is the novel's exemplar of the Christian work ethic that also underpins the security of belief in the national, a conjunction vital to the text's portrayal of a culturally orthodox mid twentieth-century Australian life. Oriel is the dominant force behind the Lambs' shop, to the extent that all of Cloud Street 'would be full of ... the reverberations of Oriel's instructions' (58). Equally Oriel's matriarchal power maps the family on to the nation:

The Anzacs were what the Lambs believed in, the glorious memories of manhood and courage. The nation, that's what kept the Lambs going. They were patriots like no others. The thought of World Communism put fear in their hearts. Oriel had dreams about Joe Stalin — she knew what he was about. They weren't political, Lester and Oriel, but they were proud and they offered themselves to the nation. (144)

Yet the novel makes it clear that this conception of a working-class national community, seemingly secure in its version of history and politics, is ultimately insufficient in allowing its characters to embrace a meaningful sense of home. In a key exchange in the middle of the novel, set during the Second World War, Oriel articulates a lack of belonging that is both familial and cultural. Because of Fish's rejection of her following his accident, Oriel now doubts other allegiances:

Since Fish.... I've been losing the war. I've lost me bearins.

Lester makes his teeth meet at all points around his jaw. Talk like this makes him nervous. Something's going to happen, to be taken from him, to be shone in his face. It's like walking down a rocky path at night, not knowing where it'll lead, when it'll drop from beneath your feet, what it'll cost to come back.

You believe in the Nation, though. You're the flaming backbone of the Anzac Club.

Ah, it's helping the boys, I know, but I read the newspaper, Lester. They're telling us lies. They'll send boys off to fight any war now. They don't care what it's for.

But, but the good of the country —

Oriel put a blunt finger to her temple: This is the country, and it's confused. It doesn't know what to believe in either. You can't replace your mind country with a nation, Lest. I tried.

Lester almost gasps. It's one thing for him to say it, but for her to admit such a thing, it's terrifying.

You believe in hard work, love.

Not for its own sake, I don't. We weren't born to work. Look at them next door.

There's always the family, says Lester.

Families aren't things you believe in, they're things you work with. (231–32)

The personal trauma that causes Oriel's revision of her system of belief is Fish's accident. Reading the event as a sign of the absence of God, she spends the bulk of the remainder of the novel trying to negate the fact that she is a believer; but, like Quick and Lester, she is tied to the specifics of place, a relationship both geographical and spiritual: 'her life had always come back to the river' (176). Through Oriel, Winton is explicit in suggesting that the spiritual power of the everyday must be retrieved from the codifications inherent in orthodox formations of Church and State. The final act of the novel, Oriel taking down the tent in which she has been sleeping in the garden and returning to the house with Dolly Pickles, is one of acceptance in front of a 'small congregation' (425), and it is crucial that this takes place immediately *after* Fish's return to the river. For Oriel, the power of family and community can only be found following a release. This is not a simple conclusion whereby a clear, straightforward sense of the divine is revealed — Winton's fiction is notable for its ambiguous endings (Guy 131); rather Oriel's recognition is an instinctive apprehension of the value of day-to-day struggles. As Winton has said of his characters in *Cloudstreet*: 'They are not the kind of people who define what they are sensing' (Butstone 21).

Crucial to the power and depth of the novel is the nature of actual or potential apprehension for many characters. Quick's visions in the bush are complemented by many examples of the surreal and visionary: the aboriginal angel saves Oriel from the neighbourhood serial killer (367); a Pentecostal pig talks in tongues (129); Earl and May drive Quick back to the city while he lies 'lit up like a sixty watt globe' (219); Fish and Quick row a boat Lester has bought, and Quick finds the 'sky, packed with stars, rests just above his head, and when Quick looks down the river is full of sky as well. There's stars and swirl and space down there and it's not water anymore — it doesn't even feel wet' (114). Andrew Taylor has read these scenes as being evidence of Winton's prose displaying a 'move beyond narrative, and indeed beyond the condition of language' (329). Certainly this fits with Winton's own descriptions of his characters and their lack of 'definition', and the 'unique difficulty' he finds in writing of spiritual

issues in a widely anti-religious society where orthodox religious categories of expression might be resisted (Butstone 20). Yet, even as such moments of vision do point to a reconfiguration of Christian faith, they also function more widely as a celebration of the mundane and ordinary. *Cloudstreet* rejoices in the rhythms of work and the sights and sounds of the everyday. Fish may be a 'seer' conceived of in terms of the possibilities of rebirth, but he is also an object of filial love and the catalyst for the definition of family responsibility. The pig may possibly reveal the divine, but it is equally a potential meal. If Winton's fiction approaches transcendence, it does so with roots firmly established in the detail of lived experience.

In his novels following *Cloudstreet*, *The Riders* (1994) and *Dirt Music* (2001), Winton offers a return to a more problematic sense of community. Both Fred Scully and Luther Fox, the central protagonists of each text respectively, are highly mobile individuals, dislocated from settled spaces, and driven on quests for meaning that are anything but straightforward. In this they mirror the concerns of the characters of Winton's novels of the 1980s (Matthews 84), and those of Quick for much of *Cloudstreet*; but ultimately *Cloudstreet* edges towards an idea of community that is full, if not secure. As Winton has said of what Quick learns in the novel: 'it is not about in and out, you and me, or us and them. It's just about us and here. We spend a lifetime learning distinctions that do not exist, defining ourselves against other people and other worlds of existence. But at the end of the day, human life is whole' (Butstone 21). The novel's delineation of wholeness not only brings together characters in a location whereby the family becomes tribal, but it underscores the constructions inherent within Australia's cultural nationalist project. Allowing individuals to achieve the state of 'being' that Fish attains, or even to recognise it as a possibility, Winton writes of a sense of place that possesses a resonance that goes beyond the simple geographies of family, house, street or river.

WORKS CITED

- Butstone, David 1992, 'Spinning Stories: Visions', *Sojourners*, 21.8, pp. 18–21.
- Guy, Elizabeth 1996/7, 'A Conversation with Tim Winton', *Southerly*, 56.4, pp.127–33.
- Matthews, Brian 1986, 'Burning Bright: Impressions of Tim Winton', *Meanjin*, 45.1, pp. 83–93.
- Turner, Andrew 1996, 'What Can Be Read, and What Can Only Be Seen in Tim Winton's Fiction', *Australian Literary Studies*, 17.4, pp. 323–31.
- Turner, Graeme 1986, *National Fictions: Literature, Film, and the Construction of Australian Narrative*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- White, Richard 1981, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688–1980*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.

- Willbanks, Ray 1991, *Speaking Volumes: Australian Writers and Their Work*, Penguin, Ringwood, Vic.
- Winton, Tim 1982, *An Open Swimmer*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney.
- 1984, *Shallows*, Picador, London.
- 1986, *That Eye, The Sky*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne.
- 1988, *In the Winter Dark*, McPhee Gribble, Melbourne.
- 1991, *Cloudstreet*, Picador, London.
- 1994, *The Riders*, Pan Macmillan, London.
- 2001, *Dirt Music*, Picador, Sydney.

Steven Matthews

AMOURS DE NON-VOYAGE

for Shirley

14/2/03

Is it those plumed clouds the lethargic tourists are gawping at?
Those low-hanging clouds looking as though they might be bursting with news —
Hanging smoke from the fallout of some smart atrocity
Which has laid waste to wide districts of our ancient city,
Or a proclaimed enemy at the gate, our snubbed guns trained at the sky?
Let's whisper in their well-groomed ears, as these tourists stand in wild surmise,
Rather that we read such high signs alliteratively,
Within the intimate, loving life-stories from the varied dead.
These marvellous visitations recur in our everyday,
Syllabled singly and sweetly in words of melodious meaning.
Our names for them create through hyphens most imaginative worlds:
For some they are cloud-castles, for others rain-racks or sky-scuds.
Others still make their own names for them, since, for many good years now,
Our young have been well taught to read such signs richly, as they are.